

CITY OF BALTIMORE

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Health Alert on New Immunization Requirements

Parents Should Take Action Now So Children Can Start School on Time Next Fall

Baltimore, MD- April 17, 2006 - The Baltimore City Health Department and the Baltimore City Public School System are urging parents of middle school students to act now to comply with new state immunization requirements for hepatitis B and chickenpox.

These new requirements state that before starting school next fall, all students through 9th grade must receive three doses of hepatitis B vaccine. Because the hepatitis B vaccine series takes at least four months to complete, any children who have not yet been vaccinated against hepatitis B must get their first dose of the vaccine as soon as possible.

The new requirements also state that all students through 9th grade must either be vaccinated against chickenpox or provide a doctor's note with the month and year of chickenpox infection. Unvaccinated children over age 13 without a prior history of chickenpox infection require two doses of the vaccine, administered at least one month apart.

Previously, the requirements for hepatitis B and chickenpox only applied to children up to 4th grade. Because an additional four years of students (incoming 6th-9th graders) are now subject to the policy for the first time, there is a significant potential for disruption at the start of school in the fall. To avoid a problem, parents should provide records on hepatitis B and chicken pox to their children's schools before the first day of school next year.

"For children who need these immunizations, the time to get started is now," said Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, Commissioner of Health. "By next fall, it could be too late to catch up on shots and get started on time in school. In addition, every parent should check with their school to make sure that all of the records are correct."

In coordination with the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Health Department and Baltimore City Public School System are targeting outreach to pediatricians and to parents of middle school students who may not be aware of the new requirements. So far, information about the new requirements has been shared with physicians, insurers, and schools.

Immunization is an important part of keeping people of all ages healthy. Despite the availability of safe and effective immunizations, thousands of cases of vaccine-preventable diseases occur in the United States every year.

- ◆ About 80,000 new cases of hepatitis B occur in the United States each year. The hepatitis B virus is 100 times more infectious than HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- ◆ Chickenpox can be very serious in adolescents and adults. Compared to young children, the risk of serious illness and death can be up to three times higher for unimmunized teens and young adults and up to twenty times greater for people over 30.

Parents who have any questions about the new school requirements can contact the Baltimore City Health Department's Bureau of Child Health and Immunization at 410 –396-4454.

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